

A summary of

WHO IS WRITING THE FUTURE? Reflections on the Twentieth Century

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The original document has **Five Sections**:

The opening section recalls the reference to Bahá'u'lláh made in the Brazilian parliament on May 28, 1992, the centennial anniversary of Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration. The recognition given to Bahá'u'lláh in Brazil contrasts with the continued persecution of the Bahá'is in Iran. The statement then asks: "What is the nature of the body of thought that has aroused such sharply divergent reactions?"

The first section makes a simple statement of some of Bahá'u'lláh's essential teachings:

1. That the laws that govern "reality" are fundamentally spiritual in nature
2. That the individual is a spiritual being, and that civilization is itself a spiritual process.
3. That civilization is becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated, through the "inherent moral and intellectual capacities" of the "human mind and heart".
4. That identification of humanity as the "arrowhead of the evolution of consciousness" implies rejection of the view that process has a materialist cause and origin.
5. That "wars, exploitation, and prejudice" indicate "immature stages" in the evolution of civilization, not evidence of inherent and enduring human weaknesses.
6. That the inevitable material advances must be used for "moral and social development", lest they be harnessed by nationalistic and sectarian conflicts that could use the same material forces destructively:

"Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth", he cautioned. "These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal".

The Second Section points out that the "central spiritual issue facing all people" is "that of laying the foundations of a global society that can reflect the oneness of human nature."

1. Unification of the world's peoples is inescapable: it is not a "remote utopian vision" and it is not a matter of choice.
2. All the essential problems of our age are global, not specific.

3. The suffering of the twentieth century can be viewed as "the operation of forces that are liberating human consciousness for a new stage in its evolution"
4. World upheavals have led leaders to "begin putting in place new systems of global organization that would have been unthinkable at the century's beginning."
5. "habits and attitudes that had divided peoples and nations" are rapidly eroding.
6. The breakthrough came with the post war consolidation of world order.

Long dreamed of by progressive thinkers, the new system of international conventions and related agencies was now endowed with crucial powers that had tragically been denied to the abortive League of Nations. As the century advanced, the system's primitive muscles of international peacekeeping were progressively exercised in such a way as to demonstrate persuasively what can be accomplished. With this came the steady expansion throughout the world of democratic institutions of governance. If the practical effects are still disappointing, this in no way diminishes the historic and irreversible change of direction that has taken place in the organization of human affairs.

7. The rights of peoples have also been addressed – as Bahá'u'lláh requested in the last century: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its associated agencies.

8. The Economic life of the planet is being organized:

- Pre war: the adoption of legislation to prevent effects of another 'great depression': social welfare programs, systems of financial control, reserve funds, and trade regulations.
- Post-war: establishment of global institutions: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and a network of development agencies devoted to rationalizing and advancing the material prosperity of the planet.

At century's end—whatever the intentions and however crude the present generation of tools—the masses of humanity have been shown that the use of the planet's wealth can be fundamentally reorganized in response to entirely new conceptions of need.

9. All these developments were "amplified" by education to the masses.

- Increased allocation of resources for teacher training
- Development plans focused on educational needs and massively financed by such bodies as the World Bank, government agencies, major foundations and several branches of the United Nations system.
- Information technology explosion

10. They were animated by a "a profound shift of consciousness"

- Realization of need to change "ingrained habits of mind that breed conflict"
- Advance of women
- Realization that ethnic conflicts are "willful aberrations that must be brought under effective international control."
- Realization that poverty is not "an enduring and inescapable feature of the social order"
- Advance of religious tolerance commencing with the "Parliament of Religions";

11. This shift in consciousness also embraced fundamental changes in mankind's understanding of the physical universe:

- New theories of relativity and quantum mechanics

It became apparent that classical physics could explain phenomena within only a limited range. A new door had suddenly opened into the study of both the minute constituents of the universe and its large cosmological systems, a change whose effects went far beyond physics, shaking the very foundations of a world view that had dominated scientific thinking for centuries. Gone forever were the images of a mechanical universe run like a clock and a presumed separation between observer and observed, between mind and matter. Against the background of the far-reaching studies thus made possible, theoretical science now begins to address the possibility that purpose and intelligence are indeed intrinsic to the nature and operation of the universe.

- These conceptual changes brought interaction among physical sciences—physics, chemistry, and biology, along with the nascent science of ecology—opened breathtaking possibilities for the enhancement of life: agriculture; medicine; energy; and materials science (specialized resources unknown when the century opened—plastics, optical fibres, carbon fibres.)

Such advances in science and technology were reciprocal in their effects. Grains of sand—the most humble and ostensibly worthless of materials—metamorphosed into silicon wafers and optically pure glass, making possible the creation of world-wide communications networks. This, together with the deployment of ever more sophisticated satellite systems, has begun providing access to the accumulated knowledge of the entire human race for people everywhere, without distinction. It is apparent that the decades immediately ahead will see the integration of telephone, television, and computer technologies into a single, unified system of communication and information, whose inexpensive appliances will be available on a mass scale. It would be difficult to exaggerate the psychological and social impact of the anticipated replacement of the jumble of existing monetary systems—for many, the ultimate fortress of nationalist pride by a single world currency operating largely through electronic impulses.

12. Science and Technology have brought a "unifying effect" to the twentieth century. The human race "without regard to race, culture, or nation" now has the means needed to realize the visionary goal of world unity

Part three provides perspective on the terrible problems that are facing the world, and the terrible acts that have taken place in history.

1. There can be no denying that there is 'darkness' (i.e. suffering and problems) at the present time.

- The deliberate extermination of millions of helpless human beings
- The invention and use of new weapons of destruction
- The rise of ideologies that suffocated the spiritual and intellectual life of entire nations
- Damage to the physical environment on global scale
- Problem of young generation "taught to believe that violence, indecency, and selfishness are triumphs of personal liberty."

2. But "darkness" does not have its own existence or autonomy. Darkness cannot extinguish light.

The ferocities of animal nature, which raged out of control through these critical years and seemed at times to threaten society's very survival, did not in fact prevent the steady unfoldment of the creative potentialities which human consciousness possesses. On the contrary. As the century advanced, growing numbers of people awakened to how empty were the allegiances and how insubstantial the fears that had held them captive only short years before.

"Peerless is this Day," Baha'u'llah insists, "for it is as the eye to past ages and centuries, and as a light unto the darkness of the times."⁸

3. The important issue is not the present darkness but concern at how much more "suffering and ruin must be experienced by our race before we wholeheartedly accept the spiritual nature that makes us a single people, and gather the courage to plan our future in the light of what has been so painfully learned."

Part four says that Bahá'u'lláh has a vision for world unity which many still cannot see because of their own presumptions, which are in fact wrong, and require re-examination.

If social and intellectual evolution is in fact responding to a moral intelligence inherent in existence, a great deal of the theory determining contemporary approaches to decision-making is fatally flawed.

If human consciousness is essentially spiritual in nature—as the vast majority of ordinary people have always been intuitively aware, its development needs cannot be understood or served through an interpretation of reality that dogmatically insists otherwise.

1. The cult of individualism has been nurtured by such cultural forces as political ideology, academic elitism, and a consumer economy

2. The resulting "pursuit of happiness" has produced an aggressive and almost boundless sense of personal entitlement. The "moral consequences" have included disease and drug addiction, and call into question entrenched assumptions about right and wrong.

a) The conviction that unity is a distant, almost unattainable ideal to be addressed only after a host of political conflicts have been somehow resolved, material needs somehow satisfied, and injustices somehow corrected.

Baha'u'llah says the opposite. The human race is distinguished by its capacity for collaboration and its progress depends on unified action. Conflict is not an intrinsic feature of human nature, but a complex of learned habits and attitudes.

b) An inadequate concept of justice. "If the body of humankind is indeed one and indivisible, then the authority exercised by its governing institutions represents essentially a trusteeship. Each individual person comes into the world as a trust of the whole, and it is this feature of human existence that constitutes the real foundation of the social, economic and cultural rights that the United Nations Charter and its related documents articulate."

c) The development of the self comes through service, not through acquisition of goods and self-assertion.

"Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," is Baha'u'llah's counsel, "and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."¹²

d) the predominance of the national state "in determining the fate of humankind" delays world peace and prolongs suffering.

- Globalization of the economy has brought concentrations of power that must be brought under international democratic control

- Similarly with information and communication technologies.

Part five, the final section re-emphasizes Bahá'u'lláh's vision that a new relationship between God and humankind is emerging, and that what we have seen in the twentieth century is the "beginning of the history of humankind, the history of a human race conscious of its own oneness."

- The Founders of the great religions have contributed to our knowledge of the 'ultimate reality' and have allowed earth's peoples to develop the civilizing spiritual, intellectual, and moral capacities.

- These processes have taken a millennium and are now to mature.

- The changes will not come about easily:

Whether in the life of the individual or that of society, profound change occurs more often than not in response to intense suffering and to unendurable difficulties that can be

overcome in no other way. Just so great a testing experience, Baha'u'llah warned, is needed to weld the earth's diverse peoples into a single people.

- Spiritual and materialistic conceptions of the nature of reality are irreconcilable with one another and lead in opposite directions.

- the weaknesses of the materialistic approach are becoming increasingly obvious and "the new century will see the release of energies and aspirations infinitely more potent than the accumulated routines, falsities, and addictions that have so long blocked their expression."

However great the turmoil, the period into which humanity is moving will open to every individual, every institution, and every community on earth unprecedented opportunities to participate in the writing of the planet's future. "Soon", is Baha'u'llah's confident promise, "will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."

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